DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 090 223 SP 007 965

AUTHOR Muraskin, Lana D.
TITLE Professionalism and Radicalism in the New York City Teachers Union 1927-1935.
PUB DATE Feb 73
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, Louisiana, February 1973

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Historical Reviews; *Professional Recognition; *Teachers; *Unions
IDENTIFIERS New York; Radicalism

ABSTRACT

When the Teachers Union of the City of New York was founded in 1916, its professional stance was, to a large extent, an expedient. Adopted originally as a tactic to downplay the union's strong commitment to trade unionism, the professionalism of teaching came to be viewed as an end in itself and as the union's major goal. As a result, when the leadership was challenged by a new generation of radical teachers inspired by the union militancy of the day, their defense was to accuse the radicals of unprofessionalism and union busting. To see the conflict as a contest between the old idealists and young Communists is to miss both its subtlety and its message for our times. (Author)

ED 090223

PROFESSIONALISM AND RADICALISM IN THE NEW YORK CITY TEACHERS UNION 1927 - 1935

AERA Session 4.310

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Lana D. Muraskin

SP007 965

It has been common to view the Teachers Union of the City of New York as a politically naive forerunner of modern teacher unionism whose one interest for historians or educators lies in the notoriety it received during a losing battle against Communist Party domination in the mid-1930's. It is known to modern teacher unionists solely as a "victim" of the infamous communist policy of "boring from within" (infiltrating AFL unions in order to take them over).[1] In a fifteen minute presentation it is virtually impossible to change that image. Rather than attempting to do so through a discussion of the many functions the union performed and the breadth of its professional interests—educational reform, political muckraking, concern for minorities, experimental classroom techniques, etc.—I will deal solely with the one aspect of the political conflict which has labeled the Teachers Union for posterity. By so doing, I shall attempt to trace the notion of proper teacher union functions as seen by the various groups involved, and thereby point up the complexity of the political debate and ultimate schism in Local 5, suggesting that what took place was precipitated as much by internal differences as by outside political pressures.

In its early years the Teachers Union saw its goals as basically three-fold: (a) the extension of trade unionism as a movement into a new and basically professional field, (b) the means by which to reform the educational structure, content, and most importantly, the politics of city education, and (c) the best way in which to upgrade the standards of the teaching profession itself through giving teachers the status that better pay and pensions, a say in school governance and better working conditions would provide.[2]

In the formative period (1916-19) what all these lofty ideals meant in

practice were two largely successful union campaigns, one of which resulted in a new, more secure and equitable pension system and the other of which raised base salaries by 40 percent. John Dewey, a member of the TU and holder of Membership Card No. 1 in the newly formed AFT, in a speech reprinted continually in union publications, put the issue squarely on the line,

> "It is said that the teachers unions as distinct from the more academic organizations overemphasize the economic aspect of teaching. Well, I never had that contempt for the economic aspect of teaching, especially not on the first of the month when I get my salary check. I find that teachers have to pay bills just the same as everyone else. I find that the respect in which they individually and collectively are held in the community is closely associated with the degree of economic independence which they enjoy."[3]

In the context of educational politics during and immediately after World War I (and in comparison with other AFL craft unions) the Teachers Union must be characterized as militant. Its salary campaign was punctuated by mass meetings, pickets and extensive use of media—particularly newspapers. The appeal to non-union teachers was hot:

> "Teachers, with few exceptions, are regarded as being nerveless and without backbone. Their pay is miserable...their work is exhausting... They have failed to see the identity of their interests with the interests of all labor... No group of workers can resist exploitation if they are unorganized... The children have no use for frightened, overworked, spineless...teachers... And finally you owe it to yourself...to organize for your protection, to be able to fight with dignity and force for proper conditions, for proper salaries, for a share in the control of the schools..."[4]

None of this is particularly surprising if one considers the backgrounds of many TU leaders. They came from homes where socialism and trade unionism were a way of life.[5] In Stephen Cole's, <u>The Unionization of Teachers A Case Study of the UFT</u>, one early leader recalls:

> "I was born into a trade union family. My folks were members of a trade union and my mother...helped organize the shirtmakers in

> New York City. They were the intelligencia that had come over in the 1890's and were very ambitious for the community on the East Side and the publications that were being organized, like the Daily Forward. I came from a socialist background. At that time, socialists were unionists and there was no debate about that."[6]

James Weinstein's The Decline of Socialism in America 1921-1925 identifies one early TU leader in the Socialist Party, of which several were members, but notably in a faction which developed anti-Soviet attitudes in the early 1920's.[7]

Response, on the part of school officials, to the formation, militancy and early success of the TU, was swift. Supported by the repressive atmosphere generated by World War I, they succeeded in gaining the dismissal of three union teachers on the flimsiest of evidence with the ubiquitous charge of "conduct unbecoming a teacher."[8] On the heels of these dismissals came the Red Scare and the infamous Lusk Committee of the New York State Legislature which sought to bring about administration spying on and evaluation of the loyalties of teachers. Iverson reports that "In New York City, the TU headed by Henry Linville and Abraham Lefkowitz, was denied the right to meet in the schools, and its leaders were hounded by city, state and national authorities."[9] Abraham Lefkowitz, the Local's Legislative Representative recalled those years:

> "We suffered isolation, harassment and the denial of the use of the schools. Antagonism to teacher-unionism resulted in the dismissal of three of our ablest teachers... However, by our militancy, our liberal and professional outlook and our role as watch dogs of freedom—fighting Palmerism, the Lusk Laws and the like—we won recognition and respect."[10]

The demoralizing effects, however, of repression of union leaders were widespread in the fledgling union. In the early 1920's, the membership,

which had earlier reached a height of approximately 1500 was reduced to approximately 800.[11] More importantly, the strident tone and militant emphasis of union activities appears to have succumbed. The union seemed to retreat from mass tactics—meetings, demonstrations, etc. and turn to more limited forms of attracting members and changing educational inequities.

Union activity in the 20's was characterized by luncheons and conferences honoring major figures of the progressive movement, and pleas in Albany for higher wages. Abraham Lefkowitz, Legislative Representative, became the union's dominant figure. His "style" was political lobbying which he did rather adroitly but with only minimal success. About the best that can be said is that during the 1920's and early 1930's he was instrumental in holding the line on several attempts to cut salaries and pass restrictive legislation on freedom of expression.

During the twenties the union supported various attempts at educational reform, all of which were directly involved with elevating the position of the classroom teacher. From militant demands for salary increases, freedom of speech or the right to organize in the school, the union moved to "studies" of school conditions. They investigated health and sanitation standards, proposed a reorganization of janitorial services, developed the outlines for an experimental, child-centered school and measured the effectiveness of then current rating procedures for classroom teachers.[12] In short, they sought respectability.

Throughout the 1920's several union leaders made bids to join the administrative ranks. In particular, Lefkowitz and Ruth Gilette Hardy sought advancement and while the going was rocky they were both ultimately appointed.

Recalls Celia Lewis Zitron:

> *"With the repeal of the Lusk Laws in 1923, the Teachers Union was, for the first time since it was founded, relatively free from attack. Harassed Union leaders gradually acquired a measure of respectability, and even won recognition from school officials. The Union, in turn, in evaluating such officials, became less critical of their demand for political conformity."*[13]

Internally, the 1920's saw a mellowing of union philosophy and an extended debate on the legitimacy of unionism for professionals. Specifically, the leadership portrayed the organization as unique, blending a concern for the rights of teachers with those of students and parents. They argued that the self-labeled professional organizations, such as the NEA, were not really professional at all because they served only the interests of teachers and neglected students, closing their eyes to political interference with the schools, the lack of academic freedom or the poor quality of the teaching staff.

The union format, they continued, was best able to solve educational problems for several reasons, (a) a union viewed its members in a social context, recognizing their "interests" as not dissimilar from those of other workers in a capitalist society. It did not set the teacher off as someone apart or above from the community but rather created important links between teachers and others struggling for a decent life; (b) a union, unlike a traditional "professional" organization, could be concerned with issues of basic importance to teachers—salaries, benefits, decision-making power, (though it was clearly up to a teachers union to keep the issues high-minded); (c) a union provided leverage against powerful opposing "interests"—politicos, bankers, school administrators. When teachers chose a union to represent

them, they brought to the inevitable conflict with the "interests" the support and weight of a powerful segment of American society—organized labor. In a confrontation, the TU, unlike e.g. a borough teachers association, did not have to stand alone.

By 1930, the TU seemed on its way to not only assuring its own future in New York City teacher politics but convincing other teacher organizations of the legitimacy of its middle-of-the-road position vis-a-vis unionism and professionalism. It's 1927 salary fight had been carried on with the assistance of several major traditional teacher organizations—most importantly the Kindergarten-6B Association whose leader, Joanna Lindlof, was a union leader as well. The soon to be completed plans for the formation of a Joint Committee of Teacher's Organizations were well under way, and while the philosophical and tactical differences ran deep, it seemed as if the TU might slowly win a substantial number of New York City's teachers and teacher-leadership to their moderate approach.

The TU's alliance of professionalism and unionism, however, rested upon an uneasy foundation. At its base, what appeared to be a neat pairing of philosophies had become the acceptance of professional goals and of rather conservative union means to attain them. The TU never had a salary campaign because they only wanted higher salaries (a "bread and butter" issue). They had a salary campaign because they wanted higher salaries <u>in order to</u> (1) give teaching greater status, or (2) attract teachers with greater competency and ability, or (3) improve teacher physical and psychological morale and hence their classroom performance. Most union activities were even less "unionist" than the salary fights.

All this is not to suggest that Lefkowitz, Linville and the rest of the TU leadership were not unionists. They certainly viewed themselves as unionists first and foremost. But they were clearly outside the mainstream of union activity, more so each year as the 1930's brought about the most rapid unionization of workers the country had seen. They came to be interested onlookers and little more. Their overriding desire to become respectable spokesmen for all New York City teachers and to simultaneously insure their own survival, became the union's paramount internal objectives. By 1935, the union's "distance" from the center of militant trade unionism was to prove central to its collapse.

Robert W. Iverson, the only previous writer to seriously explore the reasons behind the 1935 TU schism, concludes that the union fell apart because of a concerted Communist Party effort to overthrow the leadership and take power. While there is little doubt that some members of the largest opposition faction were members of the Communist Party and may very well have desired that outcome, desire alone fails to account for their success. Their faction, the Rank and File self-labeled, never commanded either the prestige or the votes to pull it off. At the height of their power and in conjunction with other factions, they commanded less than 1/3 of the total votes.[14] *In the end (after failing in an attempt to oust the radical leadership), the majority of the existing leadership walked out. They were never voted out of office.*

* * * * * *

An opposition faction, The Progressives, had existed in the TU since the mid-1920's but they had performed as a loyal opposition until about 1929

when a major rupture on the Left (the expulsion of the Lovestonite wing of the CP) foreshadowed a similar split within the TU's radical ranks. During 1930-31 the faction began to take shape.

The exact point at which the Rank and File faction came to be viewed by the union leadership as a threat to the union's existence is not altogether clear. In 1931 the faction was so small that its future leader, Isidore Begun appeared on the Progressive Slate as a candidate for the union's Executive Board. By the following year the Rank and Filers were strong enough to run their own slate of candidates and while not making an overwhelming showing at the ballot box, it was apparent that the faction had a solid core of committed followers.[15]

The Rank and File faction differed with the Progressives in several areas. While the progressives had opposed union policies they were generally reluctant to expose internal difficulties to those outside the union. Though their hostility to the TU's leadership group was well developed, they were nonetheless committed to a strengthening of the labor movement and felt exposing the union's weaknesses to non-members would be self-defeating in the attempt to attract enthusiastic change-oriented radicals.

The Rank and Filers, on the other hand, saw the possibility for a change of union leadership in the near future as unlikely and were, therefore, willing to launch as "hot" as possible a campaign against them.[16] *Not only were general membership and Delegate Assembly meetings characterized by Rank and File fillibusters and other "disruptions" but Rank and File speakers sometimes attacked the union leadership at mass meetings on such critical issues as academic freedom. At one such meeting with over 1400 in attendance,*

a Rank and File leader launched a vitriolic blast at Linville and Lefkowitz for "red baiting" in the case of three Rank and Filers dismissed from teaching after "exposure" within the union. Said the Progressives:

> "By introducing the question of the red-baiting methods of union leaders and by publicly attacking the Union itself, before hundreds on non-union teachers and other citizens, the Rank and File leaders once again attempted to deliberately discredit the Union before non-union people, and proved their lack of confidence in the possibility of winning the Union membership."[17]

The other major respect in which Progressives and Rank and Filers differed widely was on the question of the establishment of what can only be termed "dual unions." In keeping with what had become general operating behavior among radicals and especially Communists dissatisfied with more conservative AF of L unions, the Rank and File was instrumental in the establishment and operation of two teachers "unions" at least one of which sought a membership parallel to that sought by the TU. The parallel unions in which Rank and Filers held key positions were called the Classroom Teachers Association and the Unemployed Teachers Association. For the creation of these groups which, (though apparently quite small) kept up a barrage of brickbats aimed at the TU, the Rank and Filers were continuously castigated by Progressives and the union leadership alike. Among trade unionists, dual unionism is an almost unpardonable sin which is seen as weakening what must be a united labor movement through dividing the workers against their own best interests. Dual unionism does not, of course, jibe with the Communist directive to "bore from within," the supposed and insidious Rank and File policy, so vehemently attacked by TU leaders. However, this inconsistency was overlooked.

What did the Rank and Filers stand for? Between 1932 and 1935 their platform remained very much the same. It rested most basically on a commitment to what they termed "mass action." They demanded the union use tactics such as pickets, large delegations to city hall or Albany, rallies and the like, not only to publicize the union's position but, through a show of numbers, to force administrators or recalcitrant legislators to alter their positions. They argued the union membership was far more militant than the leadership in the desire for "mass action" both to aid educational and political change and to attract new members. In particular, they were intolerant of the union's failure to come to the aid of the growing army of unemployed or marginal teachers.

A second set of Rank and File issues grew directly out of union actions. Several Rank and File faction leaders including Williana Burroughs, Isidore Begun and William Blumberg, were suspended from the union after repeated involvement in "disruptive tactics." At that time, and in order to bring about the union suspensions, leaders had charged that the three were members of the Communist Party and, as such, dedicated to the overthrow of the union. Soon after, the three were dismissed from their teaching positions by city educational authorities. The Rank and File had now acquired three faction martyrs, and not surprisingly the group adopted the issue of academic freedom as critical to the union's platform and as a handy weapon with which to attack those in power. By refusing to press for the reinstatement of Burroughs, Blumberg and Begun, the administration betrayed the limits of its own perception of academic freedom and played into the hands of the Rank and Filers.

Other Rank and File (and Progressive) issues were framed in direct reaction to administration policies. Both groups fought the leadership's efforts to limit opposition influence, first through the creation of a Delegate Assembly replacing the powers traditionally vested in the union membership as a whole, and later through efforts to weaken even that representative body through the delegation of most union authority to a simple majority vote of the Executive Board. Leadership "red baiting" of its opposition was also unpopular as were occasional, expedient alliances between union leaders, city officials and other "enemies."

Even when taken together the opposition's indictment of union policy fails to give adequate justification for the tensions in union politics or for the subsequent schism? Could differences on such issues as mass action really have led to hostility so great that nearly 30 years later combatants on either side refused to speak with one another?[18] Could differences on how to proceed with academic freedom cases engender such acrimony? Given these questions, some observers have answered "no" and proceeded to solve this thorny issue by relying on a theory of political sabotage. The Communists, they claimed, sabotaged the union by "boring from within", willfully creating an atmosphere so full of animosity and hatred that reconciliation was impossible.

While there may be some truth in this interpretation it obscures some questions and ignores others. First of all, if the Rank and File tactic was to "bore from within" or adopt the united front, why create dual unions? The dual unions drained the union of potential radical members and more importantly, weakened the original union in making it simply one among many.

Why not concentrate all energies on taking over the TU? The only realistic answer to this dilemma is that the Rank and File did not see the takeover of the TU as probable in the near future. (The Progressive statement related above supports this idea.) As a result, they created the Classroom and Unemployed Teachers Associations to provide them with a base for launching their brand of protest.

The explanation for the "success" of the Rank and Filers in assuming the leadership of Local 5 lies to a much greater degree in the response to its activities on the part of the old leadership than in the plans of its own leader. At every provocation the old leaders over-reacted and the opposition succeeded in forcing them into more and more reactionary political stances. In the beginning, the Lefkowitz/Linville group conducted "investigations" of the radicals, the most famous of which was carried out under the direction of John Dewey.[19] *While the results of the study generally supported Lefkowitz's charges of left wing factionalism and dual unionism, the committee was not of the opinion that the differences it had exposed spelled the union's doom. They called for a flexibility of attitudes on all sides, a delegate assembly to tame the union's unbridled open meetings, and recommended the six month suspension of the leader of the Rank and Filers.*

The union's Executive Board used the Dewey Report as the springboard for a repressive attack on the opposition groups, called for the ouster of several leaders and an amendment to the Union Constitution which vested the Executive Board with extraordinary powers including the power to try and expel members on charges of "disruptive or anti-union conduct." Most significantly, the leadership countered with vitriolic red-baiting of opposition leaders, as

strong as anything dished out by the radicals. Later that year the Executive Board refused to support the Begun-Burroughs-Blumberg academic freedom cases. Henry Linville could barely disguise his glee in the misfortune of these Rank and File leaders.[20] At a union mass meeting on academic freedom in mid-1934, a Rank and File broadside reported that "...Mrs. Joanne Lindlof spoke <u>against</u> the reinstatement of (the three)... She had the audacity to say publicly what other administration leaders have said privately."[21]

Throughout 1934 tensions mounted until finally the Administration itself became an organized faction called the "Organized Union Majority." In early 1935 they devised what they saw as a "last ditch" attempt to save their power. They decided to go to the National Convention of the AFT and ask for the dissolution of Local 5 and the granting of a new charter. The new union, they realized would be able to restrict its membership. For reasons outside the control of the local, the resolution calling for dissolution was defeated at the convention and many OUM members, led by Lefkowitz and Linville, approximately 800, quit the TU.

Two basic questions arise from this discussion: (a) how can we account for the intensity of intra-union, factional hostility, (b) why were the radicals ultimately successful. Our discussion has touched briefly upon some possible explanations.

The hostility arose not only because some of the radicals were members of the Communist Party and sought control of the union or because some of the older leadership had anti-Communist attitudes predating the current confrontation. Nor did it only develop because the radicals were unmannered, verbose and belligerent or because the old leaders refused to grant even reasonable

demands or relinquish any of their control over union affairs. All these are true but they are only a partial explanation.

What we believe is that underlying ideological, heretofor unexplored, reasons account for the degree of factional in-fighting. We believe much of the difficulties in Local 5 may be laid to the existence of competing views of the union's functions and responsibilities. In the union's earliest days its leadership had been committed to both militant trade unionism and the basic restructuring of American society. Over the years, however, due primarily to the reactions they received their position had been considerably mellowed if not compromised. By the early 1930's, the delicate balance between unionism and professionalism had moved toward a rejection of union tactics—strikes, pickets, really any sort of mass action. To a large extent they came to believe their own rhetoric that tactics aimed solely at the teacher's economic improvement were unprofessional.

Added to this, the Depression made these older teachers fearful but not truly economically destitute. In this condition they had little to gain but everything to lose by supporting really militant union activities. The 1920's had been years of organization building and of moving toward personal and organizational respectability. They were simply unwilling to jeopardize hard-fought gains, risking their organization for the benefit of younger members with whom they had basic educational and political differences.

These younger members who generally belonged to or sympathized with one or another of the opposition factions, in general held a different conception of the union's functions and responsibilities, a conception shaded by their own marginal teaching status: substitute, per diem, or unemployed. They were

inspired by the militant organizing of the CIO and by leftist ideology though only a few of them, including those in the Rank and File faction, were actually members of the Communist Party.[22]

What happened in the TU between 1930 and 1935 was that the always tenuous alliance of unionism and professionalism fell apart. It fell apart because a substantial proportion of the newer, younger and more leftist membership was not committed to its maintenance. Those members were by no means agreed upon what alternatives to pursue, but they were all clearly dissatisfied with the "old" ways. Unlike Linville or Lefkowitz, their goal was not professionalism. Their ambition was for a radical transformation of American society and being a teacher was important only so far as it aided in that endeavor. Teacher expertise, for example, might aid in finding the best way to get your social message across and accepted.

Unions, too, would play a part in transforming society, as workers banded together to join power. But these would be <u>real</u> unions, not unions that compromised at every turn—no strikes, no pickets, etc. In a time when the militancy of the CIO was making daily headlines and capturing the romantic spirit of sympathetic teachers, the TU seemed a pale, hollow and gutless organization of fearful civil servants.

In short, a very shaky professional unionism also fell apart because the younger teachers saw themselves as political radicals first and teachers only so far as it aided in the larger struggle for change. Even those who had no particular ideological commitment were intolerant of the milktoast response of the union leadership to a depression which saw millions unemployed. And with their votes, they supported men and women with more defined ideas of how change ought to come about.

FOOTNOTES

1. Robert W. Iverson, The Communists and the Schools, New York 1959, Extensive discussion of events leading up to and including the 1935 schism in Local 5.

2. See 1916 Union Constitution for explicit statement of goals.

3. Reprinted often, including American Teacher, January, 1928.

4. American Teacher, February, 1916.

5. Celia Lewis Zitron, The New York City Teachers Union, 1916-1964 N. Y. 1968 pp. 15-21; Stephen Cole, The Unionization of Teachers, A Case Study of the UFT, N. Y. 1969 pp. 11-13.

6. Cole, p. 12.

7. James Weinstein, The Decline of Socialism in America 1912-1925 p. 249. The man identified was Benjamin Glassberg of the Workers Council.

8. Howard Beale, Are American Teachers Free? N. Y. 1936. See also, Zitron, Iverson, Thomas R. Brooks, Towards Dignity, A Brief History of the United Federation of Teachers, N. Y. 1967.

9. Iverson, p. 13.

10. Commission on Educational Reconstruction, Organizing the Teaching Profession, The Story of the American Federation of Teachers, Glencoe, Illinois, 1955 p. 32.

11. Good figures on numbers of members are virtually impossible to obtain. These are estimates based upon a variety of indirect comments and interviews.

12. Teachers Union of the City of New York, A Survey of the Schools by the Teachers, Nos. 1-4, N. Y. 1921-25.

13. Zitron, p. 20.

14. Report of the Committee on Elections, 1935, Union Broadside.

15. Report of the Committee on Elections, 1932, Union Broadside.

16. Progressive Group Election Program, Progressive Broadside, 1934.

17. *Progressive Group Statement on Red-Baiting and the June 8 Mass Meeting*, Progressive Broadside, 1934.

18. This author encountered a surprising degree of suspicion and anger in interviews with surviving participants during 1972 and 1973.

19. The Report of the Special Grievance Committee of the Teachers Union, April 29, 1933.

20. *Union Teacher*, May, 1933.

21. Rank and File Broadside, June 14, 1934.

22. Bella Dodd, *Children of Darkness*, N. Y. 1954.